

Berries, Bridges, and Snow Pants

I've just come in from a November morning walk with my two-year-old son, and our eyes are still adjusting from the bright day to the dim glow inside our house. We both let out a sigh and flop onto the ground, thankful for the fresh air and also for the warmth of our home. As we wiggle out of our boots, snow pants, hats, mittens, and wool sweaters, our cheeks seem to become even rosier. Our normally curly hair looks as if it has been pressed with an iron, leaving only static behind. It is lunchtime and our bellies are growling with hunger. After spending the morning wandering along a brookside path in a nearby forest glen, our meal seems to sate us more thoroughly than usual and the water quenches our thirst more deeply. We have been blessed with the gift of time spent outside.

I am reminded that this gift is offered to us each day. In our family, most days we gratefully unwrap its goodness, while on other days we don't because there doesn't seem to be enough time. Sometimes I walk right past it as I move from one daily task to the next, or because it somehow seems easier to stay inside.

Just a few months ago, when the sun seemed to shine all day, it was hard not to be outside. The ponds were full of cool water, and the garden was full of seedlings and wriggling earthworms. Even as the summer drew to a close and the autumn began, there were apples to pick, leaves to play in, and pumpkins to gather. But now it is cold. The leaves have all fallen, morning birdsong no longer entices me, and the autumn is giving way to frost and icicles. It is harder to find the enthusiasm for extended amounts of outdoor time, especially when I think about the number of layers that will be needed to keep out the cold. Dressing myself is one thing, but dressing a toddler, as parents know, is another.

As I have begun to explore this season with my son I have rediscovered some amazing and inspiring things. These are the things that get me over the hump of thinking "it's just easier to stay inside." One such thing is my pair of snow pants. Yes, *my* snow pants. I long ago upgraded to a sturdy pair and left the "bibs" of elementary school behind. Now I happily pull on these snow pants because, different from a brisk hike I might take by myself, a walk with a toddler tends to go slowly, meandering from one discovery to the next. With my snow pants on, I can join my son kneeling on the cold ground while we toss stones into the water. I can sit on an icy stone wall while we listen to the wind blow through the leafless trees. All the while, I stay warm. Snow pants. Priceless.

As I was lying side by side with my son on a footbridge today in said snow pants, the low November sun was shining over our heads, while a blanket of crunchy brown leaves lay below us. I pushed away some leaves and found a family of pointy green plants, snugly waiting for a blanket of snow. While I was wondering what kind of plants they were, I noticed that my son was more interested in the sound and feeling of kicking his boots on the wooden bridge. It was such a simple moment. We'd each made a discovery. I was grateful to have had the presence of mind to let him have his moment and to enjoy my own. It reminded me that being out in the woods with children has more to do with offering an experience than with giving names to trees and plants and explaining the "whys" of natural processes.

On the way back to our car, we walked past a bush with bright red berries. In an otherwise drab landscape, these berries seemed to be a natural mascot for the upcoming holiday season. I picked a few branches, which are now in a vase in our home and remind me of the day. I have found myself wondering what that same bush will look like with snow upon its branches and what its leaves will look like come spring. I look forward to walking past these same bushes throughout the year to see how they do change and grow, and with me will be my son. I can't think of a more nourishing way for him to forge a relationship with the natural world than to offer him the chance to explore it, to observe it, and to watch it change.

Much attention is currently being given to the importance of nature in the life of a growing child. The scientific and educational communities are making it clear that being outside is a crucial element of childhood

development. As psychologist Dr. Reggie Melrose writes in her article *Why Waldorf Works: From a Neuroscientific Perspective*: (available at <http://themagiconions.blogspot.com/2010/10/discovering-waldorf-waldorf-from.html>):

Nature is one critical antidote to the increases in stress, overwhelm, burnout, and dropout we are witnessing in the educational system today. Lack of exposure to nature causes such a detrimental state to the brain and is so pervasive today we have a name for it: "nature deficit disorder."

As parents, we know that we do whatever it takes to try to eliminate the stresses in our children's lives. Given the above suggestion, one of the simplest things we can do is to take our children outside. Regardless of where you live, you and the children in your life can experience the rewards of time outdoors. It is all at our front door. All we have to do is open it, take a step outside, and unwrap the gift of the outdoors.